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Laurence W. Mazzeno
Alvernia University

Sue Norton
Technological University Dublin, susan.norton@tudublin.ie

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Thirty-Six-Point Perpetua: John Updike's Personal Essays in the Later Years

Sue Norton

Articles

Laurence W. Mazzeno (Alvernia University)

Sue Norton (Dublin Institute of Technology)

Posterity

In his Preface to *Due Considerations* (2007), John Updike tells us that when he was a very young man, he yearned to become a professional writer so that his ideas might join the “printed material that hung above the middle-browed middle class in the middle of the last century like a vast cloud gently raining ink” (*DC* xvii).^[1]

He remained motivated by publication throughout his life, never losing his desire to see his writing reach appreciative readers. He sometimes articulated how, in his own imagination, the printed word – typeset and permanent – offered some hope, perhaps merely illusory, for touching immortality. He writes in the Preface to *More Matter* (1999) that the assembly and arrangement of such a book offers the bliss of “bringing something imperfect closer to perfection,” but that

any illusion of “permanent form” struggles against the realizations, come upon me late in life, that paper decays, that readership dwindles, that a book is a kind of newspaper, ... that no masterpiece will outlast the human race, . . . that our planet is doomed to die in a hiccup of the sun, that the sun will eventually implode and explode, and that the universe itself is a transitory scribble on the surface, so oddly breached fifteen billion years ago, of nothingness. Wow! Zap! Nevertheless, the living must live, a writer must write. (MM xxiii)

In an essay in the same volume called “Me and My books,” he tells us of his “panicked awareness” that the best of his writing life may be behind him. He imagines another bid for lasting influence as “the little black dot on the horizon begins to quiver,” and he can “almost see the jacket, and make out the title page, in thirty-six-point Perpetua” (*MM* 62).

The desire to leave an indelible mark was a part and parcel of Updike’s “self-consciousness,” the name, of course, of his earlier book of memoirs. We cannot know whether posterity – doomed as it may be – will admire him more for his fiction or his nonfiction. He produced books in both genres – dozens of novels and short story collections, and nearly a dozen hefty collections of essays, reviews, and occasional writings. While contemporary readers probably think of him firstly as a novelist and short-story writer of opulent mimesis, future readers may see him equally as a composer of disarmingly erudite journalistic prose. His nonfiction was continually in demand. Periodicals of the finest reputation, as well as any others he chose to write for, were keen to publish his critical work, devotees were keen to read it, and he, clearly, was thoroughly eager to write it. The bulk of his nonfiction is comprised of reviews and copiously informed musings on culture and society. A smaller quotient of it might be described as “personal essay” – a *much* smaller quotient.

For it would seem that, determined as John Updike was to write himself into immortality to the greatest extent possible, he was noticeably less determined, especially in his later years, to render himself his own subject matter. He explains his reticence in *Self Consciousness* (1989): “The fabricated truth of poetry and fiction makes a shelter in which I feel safe, sheltered within interlaced plausibilities in the image of a real world for which I am not to blame” (231). He makes the same claim in an essay written for the *London Times* in 1995, writing about the importance of his short stories: “[T]hese efforts of a few thousand words each hold my life’s incidents, predicaments, crises, joys” (MM 62). Even then when he did write about himself, he tended to do so obliquely, sometimes by revealing his own anxieties or emotions via his treatment of someone else, whether an ordinary person or another writer.

When he does yield, overtly, to the personal essay form, his writing tends to have a texture more revelatory than divulging. He will tell us how he feels about his childhood, his adolescence, his young adulthood, his more recent past and his present, but he is not drawn to gross self-exposure. He does not veer toward the taboo or to the explication of intense inner pain, as so-called confessional writers often do. Nor does he appear to be seeking empathy or absolution. Instead, he gazes calmly upon his own life and articulates what he sees in terms as neutral and exacting as words will allow. From time to time, a certain sensitivity is exposed in his constant need to justify writing as a profession – and his writing in particular – against charges of irrelevancy.

But given the transcendence of privacy so increasingly characteristic of popular American culture, it is perhaps a little unusual that Updike’s personal essays were commercially appealing, somewhat surprising that they had a market. His self-writing does not, in other words, invite prurient eyes. He discloses little that could be regarded as salacious. What we come upon, mostly, is ordinary human vulnerability delineated with characteristic precision in a dignified tone. We perceive a definite *earnestness* to express truth. But what he offers contains little, if anything, that might shock or disturb.

Instead, what Updike as essayist seems most preoccupied with is a kind of public self-construction, an identity of record. In *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (2008), Paul John Eakin argues that autobiography should be understood as not “merely something we read in a book” but “a discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories we tell about ourselves day in and day out...” (4). Such “narrative self-fashioning,” he writes, “may even possess an evolutionary, adaptive value, helping to anchor our shifting identities in time” (xi). In such a light, autobiography, however controlled and dignified, is a seductive prospect for one who wishes his words to outlive him. Updike’s late essays demonstrate the validity of Eakin’s argument, revealing a quite conscious effort at “self-fashioning” that creates the image of the writer for which Updike wishes to be remembered.

Authority

Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of Updike’s limited venture into personal essaying, into explicit self-writing, is its quiet but recurring assertion of simple, authorial presence. Indeed, the insinuation of personality and personhood seems, sometimes, to be at least partly the *raison d’être* of his self-focused essays, which tend to lovingly encapsulate experience in phrases offered to the reader as handmade *hors d’oeuvres* might be served to honoured guests at a cocktail party. “Here,” our host seems to say, “I made these myself. I chose the

ingredients fresh, and assembled them carefully, and arranged them pleasingly. I think they're quite pretty, and I hope you will enjoy them." And also like fine *hors d'oeuvres*, they are perhaps more delicate than filling. Their gift is in their precision of expression, regardless of the matter they express. We sense the writer himself *living* through his work, staving off death a little bit more by writing the self – as boy, as apprentice, as newlywed, as novelist – into paginated existence. The intent of these limited excursions into autobiography is not only to say something to the world, but to apprise the world that *he* is saying something.

His enterprise may seem a form of vanity. That is certainly a stone that notable authors and critics have been content to cast. The charge of narcissism was made most pointedly by David Foster Wallace in 1997. While celebrating the "senescence" of Updike, as well as that of Norman Mailer and Philip Roth, Wallace expressed gladness that "the novel as we know it" is likely to die with these giants of what he perceives as a misguided stream in the literary tradition: "When a solipsist dies, after all, everything goes with him. And no U.S. novelist has mapped the solipsist's terrain better than John Updike, whose rise in the 60s and 70s established him as both chronicler and voice of probably the single most self-absorbed generation since Louis XIV" (1). Others before Wallace had made similar criticisms. From the publication of his first novel, Updike was accused of possessing a fine style that masked his lack of substance. In 1963, Norman Podhoretz claimed he had "no mind at all" (252) and had "very little to say" (257). John Aldridge agreed with him in 1966, and further wrote that Updike had neither "an interesting mind" nor "remarkable narrative gifts or a distinguished style." Keith Mano dismissed Updike in 1974 as a "middle-class realist" who "should be unread" (987). And shortly after his death, *New Statesman* critic Leo Robson wrote, "It was always apparent that Updike had more talent than sense, but it grew to be a significant problem only once he had used up his liveliest material" (48).

Updike might have been particularly stung by this last criticism had he lived to read it. Yet one senses he was less concerned about accusations of vanity than he was about writing in vain. His views on authorial intention have been well captured, and they relate as much to nonfiction as they do to fiction or poetry. He believed in the capacity of the author to conceive a purpose and execute it, regardless of postmodern theory and criticism's insistence on "subjectivity" as opposed to agency. In "A Desert Encounter" we read of *l'Auteur's* embarrassment (as Barthes would have him) at having allowed his own celebrity to momentarily get the better of him, causing him to loom a little too large over a "merry old gentleman" (HG 11). We understand his self-chastening. We divine his gratitude for the exciting life he has lived amidst the "writers, composers, painters, sculptors, and architects" (HG 10) of The American Academy of Arts and Letters, so that when "the Roto-Rooter operative" (HG 9) steps aside, *deus ex machina*, leaving our illustrious author to bid farewell to "the ancient man brightly dressed in white trousers and a striped, starched shirt" (HG 9), we behold his humility, and it is not false. Barthes's idea of the writer as mere scripter, devoid of true essence, has no place here. Humility and gratitude are the very states of mind to which Updike the personal essayist stakes a claim in this piece; they are his to have and to hold. He is recommending these twinned moral stances to his reader as well. "A Desert Encounter" functions as a kind of cautionary tale. The elderly gentleman is full of life's enthusiasm and has retained his childlike willingness to be both candid and impressed. He even relishes a little the illustrious Academy member's expressed humiliation when he smiles sympathetically and says, "I know" (HG 11).

The juxtaposition of our celebrated American author against the anonymous, affable, American retiree, bas-relief in the sands of the south-western desert, works to assert

individual identity – accrued and earned, if not provably inherent. “A Desert Encounter” is, literally, a positing of authorial presence. At the same time, it is a positing of ordinary individual presence too, in the personages of the writer, the plumber, and the elderly gentleman – the “ancient,” as Updike craftily terms him, certainly aware of the irony in the appellation, as both are residents of the same retirement community. We find all three interested in being identified with their ideas, thus marking our writer, our essayist, as decidedly modern as opposed to postmodern in his non-nihilistic optimism. At the very least, in his recording of the desert experience, we find our author’s affinity for the idea that narrative art can offer, in Robert Frost’s famous phrase, “a momentary stay against confusion” (Frost 440).

While such an insistence on authorial presence may not be unique, not even in our *post*-postmodern times, we notice nevertheless that Updike is unusually adept at making an old idea fresh. But what are we to make of that which is inadvertently expressed? In an essay in *Higher Gossip* called “The End of Authorship” (2006), Updike suggests, perhaps all too literally, that when men were men, writers were indisputably writers. Now, he worries, we inhabit a digital age of a “virtually infinite wordstream accessed by search engines and populated by teeming, promiscuous snippets stripped of credited authorship,” so that we find ourselves in a “grisly scenario” (421). Specifically, he writes, authors “will soon be like surrogate birthmothers, rented wombs in which a seed implanted by high-powered consultants is allowed to ripen and, after nine months, be dropped squalling into the marketplace” (421). Not only is such a scenario implicitly (in fact, patently) un-manly and “grisly”; it is worryingly “surrogate,” with a Google-generated “universal library” *promiscuously* replacing the “lonely forts” of diminishing book stores that had allowed us all, readers and writers alike, to “keep our edges dry” (422). In this dystopian universe of amalgamated wordlists, readers will no longer be able to look to writers for an invitation “to imagine, to argue, to concur . . .” (422). Instead, both Book and Author will be washed away in some great, digitized afterbirth.

Here, insemination, pregnancy, labour, and delivery are used as metaphors for the end of human literacy as we know it. The new “Marxist” (420) library may even bring an end to American individuality. Updike’s recurring bafflement that some female readers and numerous feminist critics took issue with his depictions of women may strike us as hopelessly naive, given this particular analogy by which the birthing table is rendered the death bed of the author. Upon it, we find a squalling demon-infant of Yeatsian magnitude that will one day destroy all of our book stores. By conflating communism with motherhood, “The End of Authorship” demonstrates how, as Quentin Miller argues at length in *John Updike and the Cold War: Drawing the Iron Curtain* (2001), Updike’s sense of self as a person and a writer was inextricably bound up with his anti-communist stance. Updike concludes the essay in gun-slinging fashion by urging booksellers to defend their lonely forts because “for some of us, books are intrinsic to our sense of personal identity” (422). This heroically masculine ending reinforces the essay’s more general feminized anxiety, which we are left to sense was merely the result of ill-conceived metaphor, latent ideation revealed in ink.

Meanings, of course, can go astray. But to the extent that personal identity can be shored up by personal writing, Updike did seem willing to try. He says in his “This I Believe” contribution for NPR that he believes “most heartily” in “the human value of creative writing, whether in the form of verse or fiction, as a mode of truth-telling, self-expression, and homage to the twin miracles of creation and consciousness” (DC 670). And, like any

proponent of creative writing, he would have known that “to try” is the original meaning of the French word *essayer*. In her article “The Essayification of Everything” (2013), Christy Wampole argues that the etymology is significant because “it points toward the experimental nature of essayistic writing: it involves the nuanced process of trying something out,” the deployment of which speaks to a willingness to resist “the zealous closed-endedness of the rigid mind.” “The essayist,” she writes, “is interested in thinking about himself thinking about things.”

Indeed, given its language of interrogation and, often, declaration, the personal essay form – latent content notwithstanding – would appear to hold out to the writer the genuine promise of explicit, clear-headed self-expression. A story, conversely, “is a kind of wandering thing that ends ambiguously,” said Updike in a 2001 interview (Schiff 86). But crucially, he was not necessarily more convinced of the essay’s power to exert definitive meaning. In his words, “those personal-seeming essays – and maybe it’s some quirk in my own brain cells – don’t have much to do with me once I’ve written them. They’re out there, they possess whatever narrative interest they have, and it doesn’t matter anymore how close or far from my own circumstances the stories were.” Essays and stories, he implies, are somewhat interchangeable and share the “same narrative impulse” (Schiff 87). In his estimation, then, both forms offer a writer the chance to leave a mark, to express or to approximate some truth, but neither is better able to broker meaning.

In which case: as much as any author – of fiction or nonfiction, of verse or of prose – would wish to limit signification, to corral interpretation, he or she will likely leave unintentional marks too. While Updike was consistently partial to the premise of authorial intent, to the traditionally understood parameters surrounding the composing, creating figure of the artist, he recognized the errant nature of all modes of communication.

In the opening line of his short essay called “A Childhood Transgression,” he says that, “in a sense, all of life – every action – is a transgression” (*MM* 799), thus calling to mind the familiar deconstructive mantra that “every reading is a misreading.” And then, in evocatively nostalgic terms, using phrases that at every turn assert mood and atmosphere, personhood and personality, he goes on to tell of how one day when he was in early adolescence he pedalled his bicycle home across the high-school baseball diamond. When it began to sink in mud, he stepped off and pushed it the rest of the way. The mark he left behind in the infield was a “profound, insolently wandering gouge. . . . It looked as if a malevolent giant had run his thumb through the clay” (*MM* 800). But of course, the boy Updike, hardly a giant, had meant no harm. He had “meant” nothing at all. The scarring of the baseball diamond was interpreted locally as an act of vandalism. He feared that he might be found out and, worse, bring disgrace onto his school teacher father. He reports that, even now, he harbors some atavistic worry that his confession will bring consequences, and he remarks “how blind we are, as we awkwardly push outward into the world!” (*MM* 800).

Thus, “A Childhood Transgression” attests simultaneously to both narrative order and disorder, to intentional marks and unintentional ones, and to all of the misinterpretations that ensue from them. Tellingly, this story of juvenile misbehavior makes use of the decidedly personal essay, with all of its aspirations to truth, as the form by which to declare “how blind we are.”

Immortality

A decidedly less personal essay, one that addresses the premeditated end of a writing life, as opposed to its meandering start, is “Late Works.” Here, the sketchy track marks of the novice are left behind in contemplation of the richly composed literature of masters. In a gently academic style characteristic, for instance, of the *Hudson Review* or *Raritan*, “Late Works,” which first appeared in the August 7, 2006 issue of *The New Yorker*, examines the final productions of a disparate group of writers — Shakespeare, Hawthorne, Melville, George Bernard Shaw, Henry James, Graham Greene, and very briefly James Joyce, Iris Murdoch, and Henry Green. Yet, even in such an other-focused piece of writing, Updike manages to reveal something of his anxiety over his own professional life, so central to his concept of self. He writes about these late works, he says, because, “at least for this aging writer, works written late in a writer’s life retain a fascination. They exist, as do last words, where life edges into death, and perhaps have something uncanny to tell us” (DC50). Despite its academic superstructure – including references to Edward Said’s *Late Style* and the work of Barbara Herrnstein Smith and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick – “Late Works,” though not a personal essay, per se, plainly has something to tell us about its own “aging writer.”

In large part, it is given over to a discussion of the final years of Shakespeare’s public career. Updike’s commentary centers on the late romances, which are characterized by numerous improbabilities and exceptional artifice, and pays special attention to *The Tempest*. That play, generally thought to be the last Shakespeare wrote before retiring to the countryside, is regarded as one of his most philosophical. It is, Updike writes, “a lovingly composed late work, the roughness of its predecessor romances smoothed, their dissonances resolved” (55). Noteworthy in the context of his own late-career creativity, however, is his view of Shakespeare regularly delivering up his work for public scrutiny. Reaching back to one of his earliest compositions, the famous Sonnet Sequence, Updike tells us that the Bard appears to have deplored his literary efforts to make a living as a playwright and player. He selects lines from “111” in which Shakespeare uses the derogatory phrase “public means” (1.4) to describe his work and employs a metaphor from the trades to lament his profession: “my nature is subdued / To what it works in, the dyer’s hand (11.6-7).” Updike’s interpretation of these famous lines is terse yet telling: writing is “Dirty work, in other words, but lucrative” (DC 54). The sentiment echoes the one from *More Matter*: “the living must live, a writer must write” (MM xxiii).

Thus, for both Elizabethan and Pennsylvanian, writing is a craft. It pays the bills – an idea one finds in several other of Updike’s essays and prefaces. And yet, almost immediately contradicting himself, he declares that art, as distinct from writing, is not something to be mastered: “Art arises, it may be, from the death-denying portion of the psyche, deeper than reason’s reach” (DC 66). Though “deaths occur” in these late romances, these “last four plays that can be assigned to Shakespeare’s exclusive authorship,” he writes, “deny death the last word” (67). Therefore, if immortality follows, it is because the writer’s craftsmanship, when combined with art, has refashioned (perhaps “dyed”) sometimes improbable raw materials – like a tale of castaways stranded on an island, or a saga about a car salesman in central Pennsylvania – to produce classics.

Indeed it is easy to imagine that Updike has in mind himself as much as his literary forebears when he writes, “What does haunt late works are the author’s previous works; he is burdensomely aware that he has been cast, unlike his ingénue self, as an author who writes in a certain way, with the inexorable consistency of his own handwriting” (DC 60). After a decade of blame for not writing a major work, and then two decades of accusation that he was

all style and no substance, Updike came to the end of his career with a certain degree of skepticism about his own staying power, a somewhat paradoxical anxiety of influence. In laying out the case for the greatness of the men and women he profiles in “Late Works,” he enables himself to see how his own work, too, may endure, and why the struggle to continue fashioning phrases and sentences is worthwhile. He celebrates Melville, who at seventy appeared to Julian Hawthorne “‘a melancholy and pale wraith’,” for being able to find “‘vigor enough to crowd onto a naval incident from 1797 most of what he felt about male beauty, human justice, cosmic injustice, and the Christ myth” (DC 60). He points to the joyfully ironic ending of Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, when Finnegan rises from his coffin, as a confirmation that – on some level, at least – death can be overcome. He quotes from Shaw, who wrote at age ninety-two, “I cannot hold my tongue nor my pen. As long as I live I must write” (qtd. in DC 61). What may be gleaned from these repeated assertions is that the writer, even toward the end, pursues his profession in the inescapable hope that his works – some of them, at least – will outlast him.

Destiny

Not only in “Late Works,” but in numerous others of Updike’s self-referring essays, this theme of inescapability is a defining one. He frequently presents the idea that “a writer must write” as one that has been with him since boyhood, at times inscribing the page as one might a headstone, offering a totality of purpose: Here Lies John ~ In Life He Wrote ~ In Death He had Written. Indeed, the autobiographical impulse is itself presented as inevitable, as in the uncannily reflective words that open the essay called “Updike and I”: “I created Updike, out of the sticks and mud of my Pennsylvania boyhood, so I can scarcely resent it when people, mistaking me for him, stop me on the street and ask me for his autograph” (MM 757). In these lines and elsewhere, Updike’s notion of having literally narrated himself into existence is a tempting one. Several of his essays, including “Updike and I,” “An Account of my Childhood Reading” (DC 658) and “Early Employments and Inklings: My First Job” (DC 665), are confiding, nostalgic accounts of a writer’s attempts to unearth his own wellsprings and take the measure both of his talent and his dedication to that talent. Updike invites us to join him in concluding that not only was he made for ink, but, in the self-determining, “adaptive” sense meant by Eakin, made *by* it too. In other words, the John Updike that both he and we have come to know has been mediated through the printed word.

He tells us in “Early Employments and Inklings” that he had several paid employments before the age of eighteen including factory work and farm work, which he found respectively merciless and mirthless. At one point, he tried to write a mystery novel. Then, in the summer after high school, he was hired as a copyboy by the editor of *The Reading Eagle*. After the “thrumming, churning misery” of manufacturing, followed by the “sun baked” labour of agriculture, he at last felt part of “a meaningful process” (DC 666). He describes the Lintotype room as hot and noisy, but, he writes, “its product made sense to me” (DC 666). Implying how human activity almost literally unfolds in a newspaper, he notes his pride at being involved in “one more instalment of life’s ceaseless serial,” ending with, “This was my element, ink on paper” (DC 666). Indeed, even in the title of the essay, with its punning use of the word “*inklings*,” we find undertones of predetermination as the youthful Updike resolves to write himself into a writer’s existence.

The autobiographical narration here is cyclical and strategic: the writing author writes about his early experiences in writing. If Updike is, as Eakin claims of all autobiography,

attempting to anchor his shifting self in time, then he is discovering that, in every season of his life, he has been a writer. As readers, we find ourselves cast as confidantes to his tale of his own becoming, and we observe him assume the position shared by all autobiographical writers: that of voluntary vulnerability, wilful self-exposure, and the invitation of judgement. The very act of telling one's own story is in many ways presumptuous. Self-writing presupposes an interested reader. But self-writing that asserts one's own special calling – a calling more special, by implication, than merciless factory work or mirthless farm work – risks derision and, of course, accusations of solipsism. Yet Updike perseveres in public self-definition. Resisting any temptation to false humility, he gives us to understand that no other walk of life could he have travelled than that of a writer, not, at least, without considerable unhappiness.

So invested was he from a young age in the prospect of a writing life, that his earliest childhood memories include intimations of mortality that steer him clear of reading the work of “dead authors,” for fear that they would “drag [him] down with them” (DC 659). Published first in 1965 when he was thirty-three years old, the short piece called “Some Accounts of my Childhood Reading” still rang true to him in 1997 when it appeared on *The Times* website. Selected for publication once again in *Due Considerations* in 2007, it reinforces our understanding of Updike as writer-by-pre-destiny. It offers us a view of a late-career writer who, as if looking into a rearview mirror, is recalling his younger self recalling his even younger self. We learn that in choosing reading material as a pre-teen, he had a “narcotic need for newness” (659), and, when he was a teenager, forced himself to read both *The Wasteland* and *Ulysses*. The latter, he says, overwhelmed him with its “whiff of death, of God's death” (659), suggesting to us once again that the “death of the author” has, for Updike, always been as much a literal dread as a figurative one.

Legacy

Though he accepted that “no masterpiece will outlive the human race,” and articulated this understanding in the Preface to *More Matter*, Updike nevertheless conceded to the human drive toward permanence. Not only did he concede to it, but he seems to have understood it as the very stuff of art. His preoccupation with lasting influence was palpable in his work, and, in his later years especially, became its thematic grist. In some essays, he seems a writer seeking understanding more so than praise. His concern with legacy is a strong undercurrent, most notably in “The Writer in Winter,” which first appeared in the November/December 2008 issue of *AARP Magazine*. Daphne Merkin has suggested that Updike's willingness to publish there reveals something about his personality: “No literary snob, he, for all that he was criticized for being one. It's impossible to imagine other writers of his stature (Philip Roth, for instance) stooping to reflect for that publication's Life Lessons column” (Merkin 198).

This “stooping,” however, suggests a humble desire for connection. By the year 2008, John Updike had no need to prove that he could secure reputable publication. While one may (snobbishly, perhaps) agree with Merkin's disparaging assessment of the American Association of Retired People's flagship periodical, *AARP Magazine* afforded Updike his ‘ideal readers’ – more than twenty million of them, in fact – constituting perhaps the largest audience he ever reached with any single piece of writing. AARP members and readers are, as was Updike at the time, past the mid-point of their lives and suffering some of his same physical infirmities and anxieties. In the summer and fall of 2008, his health deteriorated.

Then, shortly after “The Writer in Winter” was published, he received the news that he had metastatic lung cancer. In his final months, he produced several poems that would be collected in *Endpoint* (Begley 479-80). But for all practical purposes, “The Writer in Winter” was the last essay that Updike would see in print before his death in January 2009.

Whereas the tone of “The End of Authorship,” published just two years earlier on a similar topic, is plaintive and at times even strident, “The Writer in Winter” strikes a more personal and nostalgic chord. Even before the opening sentence, Baby Boomers and Greatest Generation readers would have been reminded by the title of the popular and critically acclaimed 1968 film *The Lion in Winter*, the story of the tumultuous relationship between England’s Henry II (played by Peter O’Toole) and his headstrong wife Eleanor of Aquitaine (a role that garnered for Katharine Hepburn one of her four Academy Awards for best actress), as the two argue over which of their sons is better suited to rule England after Henry’s demise. Updike may have adapted the movie title for his essay simply because the phrase has a playful ring to it. Or perhaps he was struck by *The Lion in Winter*’s legacy theme. There is no missing the point that, in his final correspondence with the world, he is both appreciative of the life he has led and concerned that his works – like the royal couple’s sons – will carry his name into the future.

The “Life Lessons” column in which the essay appears allows Updike effectively to bequeath a message to an audience that has made him both commercially successful and critically acclaimed. The insights he shares are drawn from his experiences as a writer, and the method he employs is both traditional and familiar: a comparison of older writers with their younger selves. His characterization of his profession as *work*, as a craft requiring skill and artistry that can be punishing in some ways to its aging practitioners, would have hit home for two generations that prized personal industry and honest enterprise. And yet he confesses that for him the rewards have more than justified the labor. As if in answer to Keats’ question in “To Autumn” – “where are the songs of Spring?” (1.23) – Updike gently but defiantly replies that the writer in winter “has [his] music, too (1.24).”

Indeed “The Writer in Winter” is something of a swan song, one composed for a cherished audience of other aging Americans in whom Updike seeks not approval but fellowship. He deploys tropes along the way that will create a bond with readers, encouraging them to think of how they have changed and been challenged over time. Unsurprisingly, allusions to the worlds of sport and entertainment recur to draw important contrasts between the dwindling life of the writer and that of the athlete, professional or amateur. The essay’s second sentence calls up a sporting image recognizable to many middle-class retirees – and one with which Updike was especially familiar – professional golf: “There is no Senior Tour for authors,” he tells AARP’s readers, “with the tees shortened by twenty yards and carts allowed” (*HG* 3). Later, though, he takes heart in observing that “the ability to fill in a design” for a long work of fiction “is almost athletic” (*HG* 5), by pointing out that the “ballplayer can’t stretch his career much past forty” (*HG* 6).

As Jack De Bellis has demonstrated in his essay, “It Captivates . . . It Hypnotizes,” Updike enjoyed a lifelong fascination with the movies; a devotee of cinema, he understood the power that the silver screen held over members of his own generation. The allusion to the popular 1968 movie in his title is carried into the text, relying on familiar stereotypes to catch readers’ attention and perhaps tug at their heartstrings. In noting the advantages of being a younger writer, he remarks, “you are not yet typecast” (*HG* 3). But on the other hand, an older writer has an advantage over a screen star: after all, at forty “an actress must yield the romantic lead to a younger woman” (*HG* 6). Perhaps the most affecting contrast he makes is his lament

over the fleeting fame of even the most famous celebrities. “It distressed me,” he writes, “to read of some teen-ager who, subjected to the Rolling Stones’ halftime entertainment at a recent Super Bowl, wondered why that skinny old man (Mick Jagger) kept taking his shirt off and jumping around” (HG 6). If he had not yet won over his audience, Updike would certainly have elicited sympathetic vibrations with this sad observation.

Whereas allusions to sport and entertainment allow him to distinguish a writer’s lot from these more glamorous professions, other comparisons reinforce the bond he wishes to establish with his readers. Using a rather shopworn analogy, he compares writing to mining for precious gems. The writer often “mine[s] the purest veins” of the “precious lode” of “memories, impressions, and emotions” from one’s early experiences by the age of forty (HG 3), leaving the writer’s aging brain to perform the painstaking task of “lift[ing] lumps out of the earth and put[ting] them under the glass case of published print” (HG 4). The familiar activity of driving – an increasingly stressful activity for aging Americans – becomes his way of emphasizing a writer’s need for control over his materials. As age has made it harder to “think of the right word,” he admits to losing touch with the larger thought when he finds his “paragraph has skidded off” in an “unforeseen direction” (HG 4).

To note his subtle web of allusion in “The Writer in Winter” is to appreciate his verbal prowess, but the question remains: to what end? Surely one aim of all essay writing is to establish kinship between author and reader, something, we might argue, that Updike treats as essential to any type of writing. Still, this presciently parting essay appears to have an even larger purpose than simply to remind golden agers that “we are all in this together.” It also interweaves a number of observations on the challenges inherent in the profession of letters, quite apart from any considerations of age. While Updike devotes ample attention to the process of writing, employing some of his famous word play (“My word processor—a term that describes me as well” [HG 4]) and noting (to the delight of many computer-challenged readers) how technology has not replaced the need for the human brain to seek out the right word, his real point is that the worthiness of the product itself is what separates great writers from the masses of scribblers turning out mountains of published materials: “Young or old,” he states in his opening sentence, “a writer sends a book into the world, not himself” (HG 3). It is not merely incidental that he includes in the opening paragraph a list of “the idols of our college years – Hemingway and Faulkner, Frost and Eliot, Mary McCarthy and Flannery O’Connor and Eudora Welty” (HG 3). Surely he is correct that he and his readers had once thought of these giants “aswim in a heavenly refulgence” (HG 3). But one of his own more purgatorial concerns is to suggest that, during their careers, these men and women underwent the same struggles as the writer he describes in his essay – himself. A later reference to the brutal treatment that Hemingway received at the hands of reviewers upon the publication of one of his last novels, *Across the River and into the Trees*, emphasizes the universal precariousness of the writing life: “A pervasive unpredictability lends hope to even the most superannuated competitor in the literary field” (HG 6). A writer – including the giants to whom he pays homage – cannot be certain that his next book will be well received. In fact, literary history tells a different story, one that Updike captures in an apt organic metaphor: “Over time, many books quickly bloom and then vanish; a precious few unfold, petal by petal, and become classics” (HG 6).

Although Thomas Beller found “The Writer in Winter” a “bit annoying” and another example of Updike’s smug self-deprecation, over time the essay may become one of Updike’s more enduring. Almost coincident with its publication, bloggers Jamelah Earle (*LitKicks*) and Randy Ford (*The Brainpan*) posted commentaries on it. Less than two years later, Philip

Zaleski included it in his collection *The Best Spiritual Writing 2010*. David Heenan quoted from it in *Leaving on Top: Graceful Exits for Leaders* (2012). What seems clear, however, is that “The Writer in Winter” was, for Updike, an aptly final essay. Like so many of his late writings, its prevailing emotions are gratitude and hope: gratitude for a career that has proven personally satisfying and professionally rewarding, and hope that at least some of the works he has produced will blossom into classics. It suggests that, while immortality will always elude us, perpetuity remains possible.

Notes

[1] For ease of reference, we have used shorthand identifications for the essay collections from which we quote frequently: *Due Considerations* (DC); *Higher Gossip* (HG); and *More Matter* (MM).

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